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Russian Scientists Hope to Clone Mammoths

By Daria Litvinova

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In Russia's northern republic of Sakha, reviving the past has become the future for scientists who have set up a lab devoted to cloning mammoths.

The lab, opened in March, is a joint project of Russian and Korean scientists who will attempt to clone mammoths, Lena Grigoryeva, a senior researcher at the lab, told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Wednesday. Its launch was outlined three years ago in an agreement between the republic's North Eastern Federal University and South Korea's Sooam Biotech Research Foundation.

The lab is focusing on studying the tissue of the ancient animals along with their genome, Semyon Grigoryev, director of the republic's Mammoth Museum, told Ogonyok weekly on Monday. “We plan to study not just the cells of the ancient animals, but also their DNA,” he

said.

While science is decades away from actual cloning, said Grigoryeva, discoveries made during the research could be put to use here and now.

“Right now there are animals in danger of going extinct, and this research contributes to the scientific progress [that could help reverse the situation],” she said.

All the necessary equipment was bought before the economic crisis — the scientists started putting the facility together in 2012. The current tough economic conditions in the country don't deter them.

“Of course we would like to have more funds, but since we've just started operating, we don't need much at this point,” said Grigoryeva.

At the moment the facility possesses some 2,000 frozen samples of ancient animals — the biggest collection in Russia. Some of them are tens of thousands of years old, like the notorious Malolyakhovsky mammoth discovered in 2013, which is estimated to be more than 28,000 years old.

Most of the samples were discovered in the republic of Sakha, in the permafrost zones that keep the remains of the animals well preserved — for example, the well-known mammoth from 2013 was found with its flesh still red, Ogonyok reported.

Unfortunately, bureaucracy often slows down the process of scientific discovery, Grigoryeva told The Moscow Times. “Sometimes it's impossible to process samples in Russia, so we have to ship them to our colleagues abroad. To do that, you have to do enormous amounts of paperwork and deal with a lot of government institutions,” she said.

“We were only able to transport the mammoth [to Korean scientists] half a year after preparing it for transportation. During that time it was just lying there, rotting,” the researcher said. The other difficulty is to find an entire strand of DNA — usually after thousands of years scientists can only recover fragments of it, Grigoryeva added, and try to put the fragments together.

Grigoryeva has no doubts that if cloned, mammoths would be able to survive in the north of Russia. “It's cold enough, so why not,” she said. But according to her, although science is making rapid developments in this area, mammoths won't be cloned in the near future.

“I think [this goal] is unattainable in my lifetime,” she said.

While cloning mammoths might be a dream of the future, some existing species have already been successfully cloned. In the 1990s a cloned lamb named Dolly was born and it became the first success of scientists working in the field. In recent years scientists have also managed to clone mice, goats, pigs and cows.

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